

# *State Rail Program*



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## *Description of the Mode*

The 1,917 miles of railroad lines in Idaho include main lines, secondary main lines, branch lines, and short lines. The state is served by two major railroads providing connections to points in the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

The Idaho Transportation Department does not own or operate any active rail lines. The role of the state rail program is to assist in the preservation of essential rail lines through state rail planning and administration of the federal Local Rail Freight Assistance (LRFA) Program or other eligible programs that may become available.

## *Determination of Needs*

The primary focus of state involvement in rail planning and the federal LRFA program has been to assure that Idaho will be served by an efficient rail network integrated into a state transportation system, and to preserve those rail lines which are essential to Idaho's economy and the overall transportation system.

The economics of the rail system and alternative methods for retaining essential rail services are evaluated in the rail planning process. Priority is given to branch lines that could be abandoned or have reduced service because of poor track conditions, resulting in impacts on rail shippers and shifts of rail traffic to trucks which can negatively impact state and local roads. The rail planning process benefits shippers, railroads, communities and local officials who have a stake in preserving essential local rail freight service and jobs in the community.

## ***Funding***

The U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) provides federal funding for the LRFA Program. The railroad, shippers, or other private/local sources provide a minimum 30 percent local match. The funds are used primarily for capital improvements such as track rehabilitation and/or new connections. Identified projects which request financial assistance are reviewed and screened by the Idaho Transportation Department with regards to the needs identified in the rail planning process. Based on this evaluation, projects are selected annually for LRFA Program funding.

Due to limited funding and the discretionary nature of the LRFA Program, the FRA has historically funded only one project per state per year. Future projects beyond a one- or two-year horizon are difficult to anticipate because the state rail system has been changing as major carriers sell or lease lines to smaller regional carriers, and because of uncertainties about future federal funding. Congress has not appropriated funds for the LRFA Program since fiscal year 1995. Congress and the Administration are considering several proposals to fund rail-freight projects in the reauthorization of ISTEA.

## ***Project Selection***

The track rehabilitation program is designed to improve those rail lines in the state that have suffered from deferred maintenance, and the infusion of funds could prevent the rail line from being abandoned. Potential projects must have a benefit/cost ratio greater than 1.0 and the line must carry a minimum volume of traffic. Projects are selected by the Idaho Transportation Department in coordination with appropriate local officials, shippers, the Idaho Railroad Advisory Council, and the railroads involved, with final approval made by the Transportation Board. Completion of these projects can take many years. The rail rehabilitation projects listed in the STIP are contingent on funding being available for the LRFA Program or other eligible sources in future years and inclusion in the eligible Program of Projects in the *Idaho State Rail Plan and Updates/Amendments* thereof.

## ***Application Process***

The application process assumes that funding for the Local Rail Freight Assistance (LRFA) Program, or any other eligible program, is authorized and appropriated by the time each federal fiscal year begins. So far, Congress has not reauthorized or funded the LRFA Program for fiscal year 1998.

Inquiries are made in September to railroads as to their interest in having the state apply to the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) for LRFA funding. Only certain lines carrying a

minimum and maximum threshold of rail traffic is eligible. If a railroad is interested, field inspections are undertaken to determine rehabilitation needs. Detailed rehabilitation plans and benefit/cost analyses are developed. If a project or projects qualify, an application is prepared and forwarded to the FRA by January of each year. If the FRA approves the projects(s), grant agreements are issued by the FRA in May or June of that year. Following the Idaho Transportation Board's approval, an agreement and technical specifications are negotiated with the railroad and implemented. The State Rail Planner conducts this process because rail rehabilitation needs are addressed and prioritized on a statewide basis through the state rail planning process. Federal funds are limited which normally allows for only one project per year for each state.

## ***Public Involvement/District Information***

The Idaho Transportation Department must provide the opportunity for a public hearing when a rail project is proposed. There is no federal requirement for rail projects to be included in the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP). Since the STIP reflects projects identified within the State Rail Plan and Updates/Amendments, and is intended to be a multi-modal document, any public involvement for the STIP would be in addition to the federal requirements for state rail projects. If a district receives comments or questions from rail shippers or locals concerned about the future rail service in their community or other rail issues, the comments or questions should be directed to the State Rail Planner. Furthermore, district involvement is primarily in the area of construction engineering to monitor and oversee project construction.

## ***Reference Materials***

- X *State Rail Plan* and Updates/Amendments
- X Federal regulations pertaining to the Local Rail Freight Assistance Program